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Naive Love and Mature Art
– *Two Consistent Testimonies.*
A Study on the Philosophy of Life

Introduction

There is no doubt that man has always been accompanied by art. Doubts are raised only when we ask what man needs art for. This question is usually accompanied by a derivative question – what kind of art does man need? Answers to this last one are given by three groups of people: (1) receivers, (2) more or less moralizing philosophers, theorists and art critics, and finally (3) artists themselves, who created and still create art. Receivers give the answer with their ‘legs’ – they always consociate with certain works of art, with others rarely, and still others they try to eliminate as efficiently as possible from their memory. The more or less moralizing philosophers, theorists and art critics either have the courage to learn from artists and follow them or they themselves try to point at the best ways of development for creative artists. It happens that these two strategies coincide with one another. The present essay is the modest attempt of a more or less moralizing philosopher, theorist and art critic to sketch an answer to the immodest question: what is art for?

We sometimes hear the opinion that art soothes the savage breast. Many events from the history of mankind point to the fact that art soothes the savage breast only in the heads of philosophers and aestheticians who are in love with it. However, when we leave the world of their utopian hopes, it appears that art at least complicates the urgings of the savage breast. This is proved, among others, by the fate of the protagonists of a story from which at least a couple of springs of European culture flow. It is an important adventure, since it allows us to take a fresh look at ethical dilemmas which are shared by all those communities which still have the courage to declare their faith in the power of democ-

racy. These are the dilemmas and dreams of Odysseus, who, in order to survive, must succeed in avoiding the island inhabited by the Sirens. Up to this point, every mortal who has heard the beauty of their singing has been doomed to die. Odysseus will be the first mortal who manages not only to listen to the beauty of this singing but also – in spite of this – to save his own life. But even then nothing is for free, for it turns out that many people must pay a tremendous price for the fact that Odysseus decided to listen to the beauty of the Sirens' singing. Not only did he seal up the ears of his travel companions with wax, but what is more he forbade them to obey all of the commands which soon he would be issuing in a state of melodious ravishment. And so it transpired. The more distinctly Odysseus hears the Sirens, the more assertively he commands his friends to free him. However, they have their ears filled with wax and thus are not affected by the beauty of the singing; they approach him only to tie him more tightly. It may seem that the story ended successfully – both he who heard the singing and those who were forced to be deaf to its beauty survived. Shakespeare once wrote that someone must watch so another may sleep. Odysseus could admire the Sirens' singing only because he found people ready not to hear it. Art does not like democracy. Odysseus can relish beauty only because there are people who will not. This is the first price paid by Odysseus' friends. There is still another price connected with his antinomic order: 'Heed not my orders as long as I am under the influence of beauty'. This command stirs an 'axiological' earthquake in their heads. Hitherto they had been living in a world of simple rules which were as plain as death; namely, they knew that if they wanted to survive they had to be boundlessly obedient to Odysseus. This time they learn that they are not to be obedient.

Presumably, therefore, not without reason is the encounter with the Sirens the penultimate story that the protagonists of the *Odyssey* experience together. The last story will take place on the island where the god Helios tends his herd. Odysseus categorically forbids anyone to hunt the divine animals. This order, however, is heard by different people – different because their heads still retain the memory of their recent legal disobedience. Now they are people convinced that there will possibly be moments when they will be allowed to be, or will even have to be, disobedient to him. For this reason they hunt the divine animals; for this reason they do not starve to death; but they are destroyed by the gods. Only Odysseus will survive. His need for contact with beauty could only be met at the cost of an overhasty lesson in democracy for his companions, who were not yet ready for it.

1. How was it once?

In respect to antiquity it is hard to talk about an alliance of philosophers and artists. On the one hand, Plato himself praised beauty. He said that it was a difficult thing, although on the other hand he had no doubt that the beauty created by artists actually draws us away from the truth and not closer to it. For Plato, truly beautiful is that which exists, and that which truly exists, for Plato, is only being. An artist who paints a picture of the shadow of an idea actually opposes the philosophical mission of coming out of the cave. Artists, by embellishing the world, prove that it is somehow possible to live in the cave, and thus they keep us inside.

It can be presumed that Plato was driven by envy. He was searching for a place for philosophy both in the human soul and in contemporary social life. Philosophy is younger than art; it is also younger than religion and literature and the fame of warriors. Younger though it is, it claims to have the proverbial rule over human hearts. Philosophy guaranteed people certain immortality. Plato, meanwhile, knew that art also had something to offer to people – that same immortality. However, as we know, when two huge powers enjoy almost the same place in the human soul, friendship between them is impossible. The relationship between philosophy and art is too big not to raise anxiety about the future of the commonly inherited legacy from the human hope for immortality. The things that are discussed by a philosopher, are done by a warrior and shown by an artist. Plato will more readily admit that the fame of a warrior can be a legal form of human care for immortality, alternative to that of philosophy.

In the culture of the Christian Middle Ages, the situation of art was also initially ambiguous. After all, Christian redemption is fed with God's love and good deeds, the need for which is born in man of this love. It comes as no surprise, then, that the attitude of theologians to art was less than straightforward. They admired the beauty of the world, since it was a divine work. However, they often saw a germ of evil in art. Saint Jerome (347–420) asserted that he would not let others induce him to admit painters, as well as sculptors and stone-cutters and other servants of debauchery, to the liberal arts. What patterns of weavers could equal flowers?¹ asked this venerable man, who, thanks to this nature-friendly remark, deserves the title of patron of ecologists. Saint Jerome knew that the beauty created by man was superficial; he also knew, however, that

¹ See Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (London 1999).

although it is superficial, or perhaps for this very reason, it diverts man from the contemplation of the truth of divine beauty. Saint Bernard, living seven hundred years later, also condemned art. He asked what that ridiculous monstrosity, strange shapelessness and shapely shapelessness was doing in monasteries, in the presence of the reading brothers. Moreover, what were unclean monkeys, wild lions, dreadful centaurs, half-people, striped tigers, fighting soldiers or hunters blowing their horns doing there? One could see many corpses with one head and vice versa – many heads on one body. Here was a serpent's tail on a quadruped, there a quadruped's head on a fish. A beast was pretending to be a horse on one side and dragging half a goat at the back, and here again a horned animal was displaying a horse's rump. Bernard foretells that since such a vast and strange variety of different shapes looks out from all sides, people will prefer looking at embellishments, dealing with them for the whole day and admiring them one after another, than contemplating God's law.² Bernard warns against art since, similarly to the momentary charm of life, it makes people forget what is really important. The shapely shapelessness of art has a venom that can even kill: a healthy life avoids shapelessness, it feels well among shapely forms – ontologically defined, visually symmetrical and stable, since only these can be touched, grasped and – most importantly – captured in a notion; meanwhile, in the world of art even shapelessness is shapely, that is, alluring, tempting and thus worthy of sin.

However, it was yet another option that won the day. It is well illustrated by a statement made by Suger (1081–1151), abbot of Saint-Denis, arbiter of taste and art lover. The abbot admits that when, out of pure rapture at the beauty of God's house, the multicoloured handsomeness of precious stones diverted him occasionally from the worries of the external world, and the noble meditation that transported him from material to immaterial things induced him to contemplate the multitude of sacred virtues [...] it seemed to him then that he could see that he was carried to some area outside the earthly world, which was neither fully immersed in the earthly mire nor in the purity of heaven and he understood that with God's help one could move from the lower to the higher world.³ Elsewhere, Suger suggests that everyone should behave as he or she sees fit. He finds it proper that the most precious things should be used in celebration of the Holy Eucharist. If, according to God's word and the Prophet's command, they collected the blood of goats, calves and a red heifer into golden chalices, golden flasks and small mortars of gold, so

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

much more should people use dishes made of gold, gemstones and all things perceived among creatures as precious when they are to drink from them the blood of Jesus Christ. Suger's critics state that a holiness of soul, purity of thoughts and faithfulness of intentions is sufficient sacrifice. Suger agrees that these things do indeed count first and foremost. However, he also states that the external ornaments of sacred dishes also belong to service, and first of all to the service of the Holy Sacrifice, which should be performed in complete internal chastity and complete external nobility.⁴ It turns out that aesthetical contemplation transports man from the lower to the higher world. Art liberates us from our ontological, cognitive and axiological habits connected with the world. Thanks to art we can look at the world in a different way – it loses its monopoly on mothering, not only the real truth, but, with the passing of time, even any truth that is less real.

We know very well that from the economic point of view a kilogram of gold is more valuable than a kilogram of iron. It is different on a battlefield: the man who fights with a golden sword will probably lose to one who holds an iron sword. It is similar in the world of art: a golden statuette often means infinitely less than a figurine made of iron, bronze or even clay. From the physical point of view, a twenty-kilo-painting weighs more than a one-kilo one. However, when we place the two paintings on the scales of art, it is the lighter one that often seems to prevail. A portrait of an ugly woman (if such a woman exists) can be more beautiful than a portrait of the most beautiful woman in the world. Art likes to cock a snook at the world – showing it that its settled ways and habits do not have to be the final word and do not have to bind man in every aspect of life. The artistic consent to breaking natural proportions renders them 'so-called' natural proportions: thus a man can be bigger than the city walls in front of which he stands.

For Bernard, art can only draw a human being 'down'; for Suger, on the contrary, art forces people to abandon – if only for a while – what is low and even more low. Neither of them initiated this discussion, nor did they finish it. Maybe some day it will turn out that the question about art is older by a brainwave than art itself. We encounter still today the spiritual descendants of both Bernard and Suger. From time to time we learn, for example, that an image – an image in the very broad sense, so broad that its notion encompasses everything that belongs to contemporary art or, depending on your view, to contemporary artistic culture – can still hurt feelings, offend, upset, vilify objective values and demoral-

⁴ See Georges Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980 – 1420*, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago, 1981).

ize. As can be seen, although the work of art has long ceased parading in a mask of classical realizations, it is rarely toothless; thus it still bites, stings and mistreats not only physically, but also spiritually.

With the passing of time, not only did the Church become reconciled with art, it even fell in love with it. Art knew how to seduce the ecclesiastic potentates of the world. Since they could not desire the world directly, it was through the medium of art that they made love to it or expressed their love and at the same time their sinful dreams in a morally absolutely legal and impeccable way. The virtual unreality of art more and more often appeared more real than the world, the natural momentariness of which art – and probably only art – had the courage to counter with its own artificial eternity. The alliance of religion and art becomes a fact. Art – this impressive *Biblia pauperum* – becomes a common medium in the axiological education of society. The art of images appears to be more legible than the art of writing. The situation of the mediaeval work of art was fabulous, since its desire to be a seen work of art was thoroughly fulfilled. The culture of religious art satisfied this natural need of each work of art, which, exposed in a temple, often as part of an altar, was always located in the most crucial part of the contemporary religious world. After all, it was the temple that symbolized the loftiest, or maybe even the only, values of life at that time. It was obvious that whoever wanted to guarantee eternal life for himself had to visit a temple. And if he visited a temple, he had to watch and contemplate the works of art that were there, whether he liked it or not. Surrounded by living values, a work of mediaeval art could do nothing but live; it was even in a better situation than today's visual advertisements emitted during television programmes (or directly before or after them), which enjoy the biggest viewing ratings. A television spectator holds a remote control in his hand; a member of the mediaeval community was deprived of the privilege of deciding (and thus of eliminating).

To sum up: art was in a good state. It is, however, the nature of not only people but also art that, when it is in a good state, the desire is to make it even better. But this time as well it will turn out that 'better' is the enemy of 'good'. The modern condition of art is vivid proof of this truth. Modern art had to cope with at least two challenges.

2. How was it somewhat later?

The first challenge was laid down by the Reformation, which wanted to be a return to the culture of the word. The great Reformers defined the love between mediaeval religion and art as debauched. Espe-

cially principled was the Reformation theologian Andreas Bodenstein, known as Karlstadt (1480–1541):

Images are dumb and deaf; they neither see, nor hear; they cannot learn anything, nor can they teach; and the only thing they bring closer is the ordinary body, which serves no purpose. Consequently, they serve no purpose as well. God's word, however, is spiritual, and only it can help the faithful. Therefore, it is untrue that images are the books of simple people, for simple people cannot learn redemption, nor derive anything that serves redemption or Christian life from an image.⁵

Karlstadt wanted to live in a world free from images. His drama was rooted not in the fact that he did not love images, but in the fact that he hated them. Man is enslaved not only by what he loves, but also by what fuels his hatred and fear. Hatred is a passion as great as love. Although they are certainly of a different hue one from the other, they also come together in a mutual need of expression which they cannot control. Love lives so long as it creates life, hatred – so long as it destroys it. Karlstadt admits:

Ever since my childhood, my heart has been raised and has grown in the spirit of worshipping images and respect for them, and because of that it is filled with harmful fear, of which I would willingly rid myself, but cannot. Thus, I live in the apprehension that I must not burn any oil idols. I am afraid that the devilish jester might jump on my back. Although, on the one hand, I have the Holy Bible and I know that images can do nothing, that they do not have life, blood or spirit, on the other hand, I am gripped by fear and I am still afraid of the painted devil. [...] Images are the cause of the fall of man, they are a gallows trap set for him and the reason for his misfortunes.⁶

Unlike Karlstadt, Martin Luther (1483–1546) was not a slave to images in the negative sense. He neither loved nor hated them. As a result, he writes about images calmly, without getting overly heated:

It is characteristic of images that they are not inevitable but optional; we can either have them or not, although it would be better if we did not have them at all. I myself am not fond of them. Images should be abolished only in the case of their being worshipped, not otherwise; however, I would rather they did not exist anywhere in the world, for the reason... of the bad use to which they are put. Namely, when someone places an image in a church, it seems to him that it is an act of kindness to God, but in fact it is pure idolatry. [...] One would do better to give a golden gulden to a poor man than a golden image to God.

⁵ *Teoretycy, pisarze i artyści o sztuce. 1500–1600* [Theorists, writers and artists on art. 1500–1600], ed. Jan Białostocki (Warsaw, 1985), 114–116 (translation – R.K.).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

Nonetheless, Luther does accept certain images:

Images on which one can see various past stories and things as in a mirror, are images-reflections, and these we do not reject. Only those images are idols in which man trusts, not the images which are commemorative signs on coins. [...] An image on the wall, which I see, not connecting it with idolatrous superstitions, is not forbidden, otherwise mirrors would have to be forbidden and children's toys as well.⁷

It is poor consolation for art that it can endure only as long as it draws its patterns of existence from children's toys and lifeless mirrors.

The second challenge was connected with the autonomization of art, which took place in a society placing its trust increasingly – sometimes instinctively, sometimes consciously – in democratic strategies of life. Artists do not want to have any spiritual authorities over themselves to tell them what to deal with and what not, how to do something, whether to paint over something or not. In particular, they want their works of art to be seen not just during church services. The eighteenth century sees the erection of the first temples of art – museums and galleries, representing an alternative to the religious temples existing up to now. Freedom costs. Believers know why they are to attend religious temples. A man of the modern era – more accurately, a modern man – must be convinced that he must (also) visit the temple of art. In 1750 the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten publishes a work entitled *Aesthetica*, where for the first time the word 'aesthetics' means the science of the beauty of human works or, in other words, the science of art. On the one hand, temples of art are erected; on the other hand, treatises are published that prove its necessity. Art, which in the Middle Ages explained and validated what was important and made the mysterious comprehensible, suddenly becomes difficult art, which requires explanation, commentary and – most crucially – validation. No surprise, then, that philosophers look more closely at art, which is craving a sort of self-knowledge. Bernard Shaw once said that only an ill man knows he has bones. Meanwhile, modern society learns that it has art. Together with this self-knowledge, questions arise which were hitherto not known by art: what is art for? What is art? Is it not so, that he who answers these questions is excusing art for something to something or someone? After all, someone who fully identifies with his own existence does not ask himself and the world such questions. Did the first crisis of God in European culture not appear together with the proofs of His existence elaborated by mediaeval philosophers and theologians? A beloved God needs no such proofs, for anyone who loves has no doubt that the object of his love exists.

⁷ Ibid., 120–124.

(Modern) art begins to be accompanied by more and more proofs of this sort, which indicate and describe not only its existence, but also any possible – that is, metaphysical, epistemological, existential, axiological, ethical, social, political, etc. – usefulness of this existence. It turns out that art is useful for many reasons. Here are some of them.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1749–1832) was convinced that all the arts had a double aim: ‘to evoke pleasure and at the same time to teach. An artist’s paintbrush should be saturated with reason[...] it should make one think more than can what catches the eye alone.’⁸ The English aesthete Joseph Addison (1672–1719) thought similarly over fifty years earlier:

The delights of the imagination, in their full sense, are neither as coarse as the delights of the senses, nor as subtle as the delights of human reason. The man of a well formed imagination is admitted to many pleasures which unrefined people cannot feel. He can carry on a conversation with an image and find a pleasant companion in a statue. Not only is art a source of pleasure, but moreover the ability to feel these pleasures allows us to distinguish cultural people from vulgar brutes. Art also teaches us to look at nature as at a source of pleasure. Although there are many paintings of nature in its primordial state which are more charming than anything that can be displayed by art, the more that works of nature resemble works of art the more pleasant they seem to be to us.⁹

This linking of art with the sphere of pleasant sensations is worthy of attention. Thanks to the hedonistic aesthetic, pleasure ceases to be the poor sister of the so-called main values, on which every concept of decent living has hitherto been based. It was necessary to somehow smuggle aesthetic – and thus sensual – pleasure into the ethically legal parlours of socially transparent life. It should be noted that the social condition of the pleasant life was always poor. Only people of mean spirit lived in a pleasant way, whereas true people – philosophers, knights, saints – avoided pleasures. Delight does not serve thinking well; it softens the fighting spirit and diverts from the truth of eschatological mystery. The rule was this: the less pleasure, the more humanity. In particular, the feudal society was warned against the devilish power of sensual pleasures, since it is the need to experience them that is the most faithful companion of every man. A serf must be a man who lives with a perpetual feeling of his own guilt and sinfulness. Anyone who lived in the feudal world had to have a guilty mind, had to be convinced that he was an ‘eternal’ sinner, since only then were the authorities sure that he would be obedient. In the feudal system, the serf did not have to, and was not

⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36–39.

supposed to, worry about the things that were happening 'on high', since the authorities of the day always dealt very well with the need to produce their successors. In other words, they reproduced themselves. In the contemporary stage of modern times it is different, since the authorities no longer reproduce themselves, but rather constitute themselves by the act of election. The serfs of yesterday have to feel themselves worthy of participating in such elections. They need a feeling of their own worth, as only this feeling is able to bestow on them the dignity of the subject of a democratic society. No surprise, therefore, that the philosophers of the Enlightenment underline the magnitude and dignity of each man. In his consecutive images, the guilt decreases and the feeling of importance increases. Man creates himself in the image and likeness of humanity, for which he must be responsible. Although still they have no unconditional access to the pleasures of the body, people can legally experience the aesthetic delights offered by works of art. Although people were not allowed to live in a pleasant way, they always liked and wished to live in a pleasant way. Therefore, modern times had to give some right to experience pleasure, and they gave it by means of art. When a modern man admires in a legal and official way the body of a naked woman, he is a lecher, a sinner, a hideous man, barred from any society salons; but when the same man admires a painting of a beautiful naked body of the same woman, he appears to be an aesthetical, educated, sensitive man, who can be, should be, and is worth being, allowed into the salons. As such, art is a specific way of ethicising pleasure. We cannot yet taste life and the world. We can, however, taste images of the world and images of life. Consequently, commenting on Kant's aesthetics, Hegel comes to the conclusion that thought in aesthetic beauty is something materialized, and that matter is not defined by it externally but possesses its own free existence. The natural, sensual, emotional factor has its measure, purpose and consistence in itself; however, inspection and sentiment scale the heights of spiritual generality, insofar as the thought not only renounces its hostility towards nature but actually takes delight in it. Consequently, emotion, pleasure and delight become legal and sanctified.¹⁰ Therefore, although we live in a pleasant way, we live without the feeling of guilt.

Kant himself stresses that fine art and the sciences which, thanks to the generally spreading pleasure, and to good manners and politeness, make man, if not aesthetically better, at least civilized, restrain, to a large extent, the tyranny of sensual desires and prepare man for rule

¹⁰ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1988), 103.

where the power should be held by reason alone. Meanwhile, the misfortunes which are inflicted on people either by nature or by disagreeable human egoism, mobilize, augment and harden the strength of the human soul, such that we might not yield to these inclinations. In this way they allow us to feel a certain fitness concealed within us for higher aims.¹¹ Kant does not share the sublime, and thus also naive, optimism of the ancient philosophers, who were convinced of the trinity of the principal values of beauty, truth and goodness; yet at the same time there is no doubt that art, alongside science, is a power that effectively civilizes the sensual nature of man. The aspiration to limiting the tyranny of sensual desires does not have to equate to an instruction to eliminate the desires themselves: just as long as they are good, as long as their power – surely indispensable – does not assume the shape of tyranny. Kant's philosophy sketches a personality which breathes best in the company of democratic ideals. Art brings us closer to these ideals. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is decorous to receive an aesthetic education. An artistic education is becoming a vital part of every form of education for those who are supposed to belong in the future to the social elites.

Also such thinkers as Schelling, Goethe, Schiller and the less known Wackenroden held great expectations for art. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) was probably the first philosopher to acknowledge that cognition by means of art is more perfect and fuller than that which takes place in philosophical thought. In Plato, art kept man in the cave; with Schelling, not only does it take man out of the cave, but it also takes him out whole, and not only – as Plato suggested for the philosophising man – in part, and essentially wounded. In the world of Plato, only he will see the light of truth who can admire it with closed eyes; with Schelling, one can, and indeed must, have one's eyes wide open. The work of art is a product of inspection, which borders, on the one hand, on the product of nature and, on the other, on the product of freedom. At the same time, Schelling dissociates himself from hedonistic aesthetics. For him, the holiness and purity of art results from this independence from external aims. It actually goes so far that it not only excludes an affinity with everything that is only sensual pleasure – the requiring of which from art is sheer barbarity – or with utility, which can be required from art only by an epoch that directs all its highest efforts of spirit to economic inventiveness, but also confronts science, which is a manufactory craft, with art, which is either the privilege of genius or else does not exist. In his opinion, there are no geniuses in the sciences, not in the sense

¹¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 2001), 427–428.

that it would be impossible to solve some problem through genius, but because the same problem which can be solved by genius, can also be solved mechanically. He adds that what art creates is possible only and exclusively thanks to genius, since there is an infinite contradiction in every task performed by art. The results of a science can be obtained thanks to genius, but need not be.¹² Although it was the brilliant Einstein who constructed the theory of relativity, if we believe Schelling, sooner or later such a theory could be constructed by some group of talented, but not necessarily brilliant, scientists. In other words, the genius of a scientist is replaceable by the effort of a certain community of non-geniuses.¹³ However, a work by a brilliant artist is in a different situation. If 'this something' was painted by Van Gogh, even if a thousand artists – 'bit by bit by bit'; and in art a 'bit' is an ocean – less brilliant than Van Gogh, that is, artists without genius, started to paint sunflowers, then sooner or later, all of them, contrary to Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, would wilt. Schelling also praises art for having skills which will be never achieved by man in other fields of culture. For him, a piece of art reflects that which cannot be reflected in anything else, that absolute identity which becomes divided even in the I. Thus, what a philosopher divides in the first act of consciousness and what is inaccessible to any other inspection, radiates from works of art by the power of a miracle. It is not surprising, therefore, that art is the highest value for a philosopher, since it opens up for him, as it were, the holiest sanctuary, where what has become divided in nature and history and what must eternally escape itself in life and activity, just as in thinking, burns with one flame in an eternal and primordial embrace.¹⁴ Contrary to Plato, it is the experience of art and not philosophical experience that enables man to thoroughly liberate himself from all the limitations and illusions due to which he remains a being that drifts beside the truth. Schelling states that the insight into nature which a philosopher must achieve artificially, is primeval and natural in art. What we call nature is a poem coded in esoteric and wondrous writing. However, he also adds that if we penetrated this riddle, we would recognize the odyssey of spirit in it,

¹² See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (University Press of Virginia, 1993), 369–370.

¹³ I permit myself to note that in their treatment of science and scholarship, the policies of the European Union generally follow Schelling's reasoning. According to these policies a scientist or scholar is important as long as he is tied to some grant, and thus functions within a particular scientific or scholarly community. Anyone working individually is perceived as an oddball, and no-one will treat him seriously in Brussels or, slowly, here in Warsaw, too.

¹⁴ Schelling, *The System of Transcendental Idealism*, 369–370.

which, driven by wondrous illusions and searching for itself, escapes itself. This is because sense comes through the sensual world only as through words, as through the semi-opaque mist of the world of fantasy, where we would like to arrive. Every wonderful painting is created to some extent by nudging back the invisible barrier that divides the real and the ideal world, and it is only an opening through which those forms of the areas of the fantasy world which through the real world only glimmer, appear in their fullness. Thus, according to Schelling, nature is for an artist, as well as for a philosopher, only an ideal world appearing in conditions of a constant limitation, or else just an imperfect reflection of the world which exists not outside it but inside it. Absolute objectiveness is given only to art. If art was deprived of objectiveness, it would cease to be what it is, and it would change into philosophy. If philosophy was given objectiveness, it would cease to be philosophy and would become art. Philosophy achieves what is the highest, yet it takes there only a part of man, as it were.¹⁵ From the philosophical perspective, man comes out of the Platonic cave only thanks to his thoughts, to which he succeeded in imparting the shapeless shape of appropriate notions.

This amazing statement by the philosopher, who says that philosophy is a worse form of truth-seeking than art, is amazing only for philosophers. Artists accept it with understanding. A philosopher seeking the truth of the world must 'depart' it, deprive it of materiality, that is, reduce it to notions. A philosopher seeking, for example, the truth of a chair, which one experiences with the senses, changes it instantly into a notion, which – like a ghost – eludes all the senses, whereas an artist, as Schelling points out, seeking the essence of a chair does not deprive it of its sensuality, but, through a work of art, finds such an aesthetical form of it which contains, as does the notion of a chair, all the chairs in the world. According to the Platonic prescription, one must close one's eyes to come out of the cave; in the world of art, one must have them wide open all the time. The Platonic man who comes out of the cave is a ghost, since he does not possess a body, or at least it seems to him that he has managed to liberate himself from the expectations of his body. Through philosophy, the cave is exited only by those thoughts which managed to congeal into the form of notions, whereas bodies remain in it permanently; through art, the 'whole' man – not only his thoughts, but also his senses – comes out of the cave. Only when we see the things that are individual and unique in a work of art can we see the generality that mothers this individuality and uniqueness. The object of philosophical love is humanity, and that is why philosophy – excluding its pre-postmodernistic,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

postmodernistic and modernistic, or in short, nominalistic degenerations – does not know what to do with the love of specific people; the love which objectifies itself on the bed of art, fulfils itself thanks to specific people. So again, art has something in it which is not possessed by any other field of culture – neither science, nor philosophy. According to Schelling, art takes the whole man, as he is, into the spheres where he can recognize what is supreme, and this is its eternal distinguishing feature and its miracle.¹⁶ For Hegel, let's remember, art was also a form of absolute spirit, a source of the power thanks to which a subjective entity recognized its absoluteness and as such became a fully real being. However, Hegel also remained faithful to the Platonic tradition which describes the highest form of the realisation of the human spirit in philosophy.

Among those who were convinced that art could do a great deal of good was Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805): 'Beauty alone confers happiness on all, and under its influence every being forgets that he is limited. Taste does not suffer any superior or absolute authority, and the sway of beauty is extended over appearance.'¹⁷ The great Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) also lavishes superlatives on art:

When art at last, by imitating nature, by attempting to create for itself a general language, by a precise and profound study of mere objects, comes to a more precise cognition of the qualities of things and the way in which they exist and is able to distinguish various characteristic forms from a row of shapes and reproduce them – then it will reach the highest possible step, that is, style. On this step, art can compare itself with the loftiest aspirations of man. Just as simple imitation is based on calm existence and intimate presence, and mannerism embraces phenomena with a light and clever mind, so style rests on the deepest foundations of cognition, on the essence of things, as long as it can be recognised in visible and perceptible shapes.¹⁸

For Goethe, the highest form in which art exists is style, since style leads to the most precise cognition of the properties of things. The cognitive value of art situates it higher than science, which at this time in its different fields – especially in physics – is approaching a methodological breakthrough, shortly to reach the axiomatic stage. Modern science thinks about the world in a quantitative way; art remains faithful to its qualitative approach. Goethe's declaration can be considered as an ambi-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹⁷ J. C. Friedrich von Schiller, 'Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man', in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, xxxii, The Harvard Classics (New York, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001, www.bartleby.com/32/527.html.

¹⁸ *Teoretycy, artyści i krytycy o sztuce* [Theorists, artists and critics on art] ed. Elżbieta Grabska and Maria Poprzęcka, (Warsaw, 1974), 224–225.

tious attempt to save the former ways of problematizing the world, which are increasingly often superseded by scientific conceptualizations.

Modern art searches for its place in a world which, thanks to science, is undergoing secularisation, as broadly understood. The philosophical name for this process is Cartesian dualism. God is absent from both the physical world (thanks to Newton) and the natural world (thanks to Darwin). To explain the facts found in them, we refer only to the notions of particular sciences. There also appear the first attempts to secularise problems of the human spirit. More and more often, man is located within the boundaries of the culture that forms him, the notion of which expresses the secularised form of modern man's self-knowledge. For instance, Kant builds ethics in which the source of moral law is not 'stone tablets', however we understand them, but man himself ('The starry heavens above me and the moral law within me'). God is farther and farther away. This does not mean, however, that the need for transcendence, which has hitherto been the main factor organizing human spirituality, withdraws together with Him. And again it is art that turns out to be useful, since its aesthetic temples prove to be a place in which traces of transcendence are still stored. Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–1798) describes this hope beautifully:

Art can be called a flower of human feelings. The Father of All Things, in each work of art, in all parts of the world, notices the trace of a heavenly spark, which, having come from him, has penetrated the heart of man and materialised itself into his small works [...] He likes the Gothic temple as much as the Greek one, and the barbarous war music of savages sounds to him as nicely as tutored choirs and church singing.¹⁹

In the world of art, the 'true' Christian temples are equated with the 'false' pagan temples. Art has, after all, its own criterion of truth, which is superior to the alternative criteria, of religion, science and life. Wackenroder describes the temples of art by means of terms which have formerly appeared in discourses serving the problematization of the religious sphere of life:

Picture galleries are treated as fairs, where new goods are casually evaluated, praised and derided. In his opinion, however, these should be temples, where, in invigorating solitude, man would admire, in calm and silent humility, prominent artists, those most perfect among earthly creatures, and immersed in long, unbroken contemplation of their works, one would warm oneself in the glow of entrancing thoughts and emotions. For me, revelling in a work of art is similar to a prayer.[...] An ignoble offence is committed by he who, amidst the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

hum of an earthly hour, drunk with the loud laughter of friends, enters a nearby church. [...] A similar offence is to cross at such an hour the threshold of a house in which the worthiest works of the human hand are kept for all times – a silent testimony to the dignity of the human tribe. Wait, as in a prayer, for blessed hours, in which the mercy of the Heavens will enlighten you with a revelation of loftier things; only then will your soul unite in one with the works of artists. [...] Works of art, by their nature, similarly to a thought about God, are not compatible with the daily race of life. [...] Only the peace and concentration of the spirit allow one to taste the real delight which expresses itself neither in cries nor in applause, but in the stirring of the soul. For me, sacred is the day when – spiritually prepared, with dignity – I set out to look at noble works of art.²⁰

For Wackenroder, art is the highest form of human spirituality. The modern artist replaces the mediaeval priest and saint:

Do not dare to elevate yourself over the spirit of great artists with impertinent courage and to judge them in advance, since this is the unreasonable intention of vain human pride. Art stands above man: we can only admire, worship and open our hearts before the excellent works of its priests to obtain liberation and the purification of all our feelings.²¹

All these programmes of 'saving art' arose around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their common aim was to demonstrate the existential and social usefulness of art which severed the umbilical cord that had hitherto tied it to religious values. Art was reanimated in many ways. It proved to be the source of a credible and full cognition of the things that created the world of our lives; it showed people the dimension of absolute existence and no less absolute identity; in a legal way it delivered sensual pleasures; finally, it allowed civilized people to be distinguished from the commonalty. As a result, everyone who came into contact with a work of art became a human being who had the right to sense his or her own self worth and as such could be an active subject of a democratic society. Beautiful art – if we are to believe the aestheticians – raised man to live in a world not only of beauty, but also of truth and good.

²⁰ Ibid., 116.

²¹ Ibid., 235–238. Wackenroder also spares no criticism of contemporary art: Woe betide our age, which treats art as a frivolous trifle of the senses, since it is really something very important and lofty. Is man no longer respected, that he is neglected in art, and nice colours and all tricks of light are deemed more worthy of his attention? (See p. 240) (translation mine). 150 years later these words would be repeated, among others, by Hans Sedlmayr, in his *Verlust der Mitte*. However, Sedlmayer denies art the right to impose its own aesthetic criterion of truth on other domains of the human spirit.

Conclusion

Everyone must die. Perhaps the history of mankind began when man realized that not only was he unable, but he also did not wish, to reconcile himself to his mortality. Since the very first moments of mankind, the refusal to accept the passage of time has been expressed in searching for various ways of enduring, including after death. Culture has long been competing with biology in these endeavours. At some point in his spiritual development, man, or more accurately a man, realized that the little people moving around the female were not only hers, but also his children. Although it is not certain that in the history of the human race this discovery was comparable with the gesture of Eve, who reached for the fruit of knowledge a little earlier, there is also no doubt that the history of the world would have unfolded differently had men remained in their blissful unawareness of this matter to the present day. Henceforth, striving to monopolize the favours of the female, he took care over the fate of both his sensual desires and his genes. Every instance of love is an ambitious attempt to translate these operations – for at least two hundred years undertaken by women also – into the language of aesthetic laws and obligations. St Augustine's maxim 'Love and do as you will', which formerly concerned the intimate relations between man and God, nowadays appears to be a dictum which most aptly summarizes the key canons of modern sexual culture.

The majority of religions guarantee man's duration after the death of his essence, which is most often defined as 'soul'. Art, for its part, either tried to provide similar guarantees of 'life after death' or else just supported the two ways of finding them – the biological and the religious – referred to above. In the first case, art guaranteed immortality only for artists, since it was the memory of their works that was greater than their life. Since there are always fewer artists than men who are not artists, more interesting and much more important is the second case, where art becomes an ally of the religion or earthly life of each of us. Above all, art backs earthly life when it supports the love of which each and every life is born. In 1908 Adolf Loos, the prominent Viennese architect and art theoretician, observed that 'all art is erotic'. It is hard not to agree with him. If eroticism is what we call the care taken to make the lust for life always find an adequate aesthetic expression in life, art has always been boundlessly faithful to this care. Art has always accompanied man in his most important affairs and moments; it has taught him to express and understand himself, to ask about life and death, to acknowledge the hunger for truth and love, to guard against the unbearable ubiquitousness of hatred and jealousy. All these emotions and values

are part of the condition of human fate; they are important when present in life, as well as when we painfully experience their lack. All of them are as old as man, and they have been changing together with him to this very day; thus can it occur that they play a leading role in life, although it also happens that they must be able to fulfil themselves in episodes and parts.

The case of eroticism and art is not different. Neither eroticism nor art avoids paradoxes. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the history of eroticism, and thus the history of eroticism in art, began when man was not yet an erotic being. We do not know who, 25,000 years BCE, formed a figurine of a woman out of soft limestone, today called the Venus of Willendorf (Austria); we do not know who, probably at the same time, but not necessarily in the same place, used a mammoth bone for the same purpose, thanks to which we can presently admire the so-called Venus of Lespugue (France). There are still more such figurines. They present women of – delicately speaking – fairly considerable proportions, which, at one time at least, were extremely useful for childbearing and breast-feeding. We do not know whether the figurines were made by men who did not yet suppose that they were fathers of some of the children who appeared in the group from time to time. Maybe the figurines were made by women who were fully aware that they had at some point given birth to some children and so knew very well which aspects of their corporeality were the most crucial. The only virtue of the feminine body was fertility – children were constantly dying and so women constantly had to bear them. The people of those times as yet had no need of the love between a man and a woman. Their mutual submissiveness to their own desire was sufficient.

The ancient Greeks and Romans already knew that every child had not only a mother but also a father. They also knew that desire did not suffice to make the child that was its fruit ‘only theirs’, since ‘only their’ child also needed ‘their’ love. Men and women, as represented by art, become more and more individual. Crawling on all fours, we learn to live in the world of ‘my’ man and ‘my’ woman. The expectations that form their images are no longer those of fertile nature, but rather of desiring nature, since fertility is now supposed to be the natural effect of love, and not its cause. Love needs an adequate aesthetic framework. Although it can be unpredictable, it is fond of symmetrical and regular shapes. That is why women are beautiful and men are handsome.

The Christian Middle Ages seem to be a little bit lost in the world of love. Although there is no doubt that it is love that is the highest value, it is the religious love for God, and not the sensual love for another person. Men and women choose one another only when they cannot live other-

wise: when they are truly spiritually great, they do not need one another. So it is no surprise that a man in love appears to be a blind man. Women are associated with sin. Love for them is not a source of freedom, but of slavery.

Modern art rediscovers the female body. Thanks to art, its image can be a fully legal source of aesthetic pleasure. The female nude, that is, the female body observed by men, becomes more and more attractive. That is why it is beautiful, alluring and – most importantly – submissive. Although sensuality is still not legal in official life, in art it experiences moments of true greatness and male freedom. It is a male freedom because only men may look. It is men who paint, sculpt and desire women. Women, meanwhile, must always have closed eyes. Although they submit to male desires, they themselves should be free from desire. We still live in a world where women have passive bodies and men have active souls. Only art – coyly at first, then with increasing impudence – reminds us that the female body also has the courage to want. Plato's philosophical man was truly alive as long as he experienced being; the religious man of Augustine lived to the full as long as he loved God. The modern man, meanwhile, reduces the lofty and solemn experience of existence to the mathematic and philosophical taming of the universe; the louder he declares his love of God, the more he believes in himself and is attached to his desires and needs. Modernity ennobles sensuality, especially when it succeeds in overcoming its obviousness. This occurs in art, science and life. The ambition of the natural sciences, which are based on experience, is to fulfil themselves in the physical arms of the world; love is only true when it has the courage to fulfil itself in a physical relation with another person. Both the 'limbs' of the body of the world and the 'limbs' of another person's body appear to be the only object of legally valid and sensible desire. The objective discourse of science and the objective discourse of love co-create the discourse of modern life, previously only foretold by art. Man – both he who experiences and he who loves – lives, not in the world, but in its image, of which he is the divine creator. Real is not that which is rational; real is that which can love and be loved.

It is not only science and art that ennoble the 'limbs of the body'. Sensuality unfolds its spiritual character also in love. The more a work of art exposes its corporeality, the more it refuses to be reduced to the body. In the world of art, the nudity of a work of art – as well as the nudity of the body in the world of love – is a source, not of shame, but of hope, dignity and greatness. A work of art invites the beholder to sensual contact, which opens the mind of man to values for which there is no longer room in any sensuality. The expansion of the philosophy of art to philosophy *tout court* is an ambitious attempt to indicate a new place for sensuality

in the axiological space of human life. This expansion, initiated by Kant, developed by Hegel and, in a more explicit form, Schelling, will find its full development in Nietzsche. Not only is it solely in a work of art that man can fully recognise himself, but also this recognition is a source of legal delight. Thus the aesthetic and at the same time sensual pleasure offered to man by the body of a work of art is the only legal delight in early modernity of which philosophy (aesthetics) is prone to absolve him and which he can anticipate and even desire without any detriment to his humanity. In late modernity, it will turn out that nudity (the consciousness of which appeared together with the experience of what is good and bad), hitherto permitted in the doctor's surgery, representing the dignity of science, and on a painting, representing the dignity of art, is not only permitted but also prescribed (thanks largely to the unmasking proposed by psychoanalysis) in the moments of a 'love embrace'. Although modern man was falling asleep in the world of delights legitimised by art, he wakes up in a world of delights validated by life.

There is a shortage of forbidden fruits of the existence of which art could remind us. The nudity of a man and a woman has become legal, love is legal, both men and women talk about their sexual dilemmas and desires. Eros is allowed to do everything, and perhaps that is why Eros wants less and less. Sensuality is everywhere; but as it gives freedom to everybody, in actual fact it gives it to nobody. What does it matter that everybody is a soloist, if everybody sings the same and in the same way? Once again, art accurately senses the signs of the times. Modern artists, as well as their mediaeval ancestors, warn us against the greed of our sensuality. They rarely display shapely, well-proportioned and alluring bodies. They rather take delight in disease, deformity and unshapeliness. Both female and male bodies boast of their defectiveness. On the one hand, women do not want to submit to men; on the other hand, there are no men who would deserve to be called a conqueror. Everybody loves, and that is why nobody loves anyone. The modern art of love is not fine art. It warns against love more than it incites us to it. It is art that arouses anxiety. The love that emerges from it does not procreate life, but carries on beside it.

Translated by Barbara Komorowska